

FHB's Health and Medical Research Fund subsidises COVID-19 research

The Research Council chaired by the Secretary for Food and Health has approved total funding of \$111 million today (April 27) to support the two medical schools, the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, to conduct 26 medical research studies on COVID-19 under the Health and Medical Research Fund (HMRF).

In recognition of the importance of a scientific basis in the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak, the Chief Executive has pledged strong support for research to enhance the capability of the healthcare system in preventing and treating the disease. Administered by the Food and Health Bureau, the HMRF is going to support 26 research studies under its commissioned research programme which cover a wide range of topics including development of vaccines and novel antiviral drug candidates; sero-epidemiological studies of COVID-19 in the community; investigation of the properties, characteristics, spread, infection and effective therapeutic interventions of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19); and investigation on Hong Kong's system of early detection, assessment and response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

These studies address important research areas in transmissibility and infectability of the virus, effective detection and surveillance and prevention strategies of the disease and development of treatments and therapies. The vaccine candidates will be manufactured in bulk and tested for safety and tolerability in healthy adult volunteers. The real-time population-based sero-epidemiological studies of COVID-19 in the community will help identify the number of asymptomatic people with COVID-19, map the emergence of population immunity, define the duration of immune responses, and develop a transmission model of COVID-19, which will advise policymakers on control measures such as relaxing or continuing social distancing measures and help estimate the need/demand for vaccines when they become available. The studies will last from 12 months to 24 months.

"The Government has been supporting specific commissioned research programmes to address emergent health threats such as the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome in 2003 and human swine influenza in 2009. Riding on previous research experience and Hong Kong's world-class expertise in medical research, the commissioned research studies on COVID-19 should be able to generate timely scientific knowledge and evidence in battling the pandemic," the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, said.

As much is still unknown about the spread and diagnostics of COVID-19, the Food and Health Bureau will continue to invite new research proposals to address important research questions from other universities in addition to the two medical schools.

The HMRF supports studies and projects initiated by individual

investigators as well as those commissioned by the Food and Health Bureau to build research capacity, fill knowledge gaps, support policy formulation, address specific issues, assess needs and threats, conduct health promotion, and more. For commissioned studies and projects, based on the research expertise, relevant institutions will be specially invited by the bureau to submit a portfolio of research/projects for consideration. Information about the HMRF is available at rfs.fhb.gov.hk.